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ABSTRACT

This paper examines practical and theoretical problems and issues that arose during evaluation of an adventure program for young offenders. During 1989-93, the Sail Training Association and the Humberside (England) Probation Service collaborated on a project in which probation clients aged 17-25 made sailing voyages across the North Sea or around the coast of Britain. Although the underlying "treatment theory" was never fully articulated, it revolved around the notion of the personal developmental benefits to be derived by young adult offenders from a challenging physical experience. Evaluation included five elements: (1) reconviction rates after voyage completion; (2) changes in offender self-perceptions based on an adapted problem checklist administered before and after voyage; (3) ship captains' reports; (4) postvoyage client self-evaluations; and (5) probation officers' survey. Reconviction rates of voyagers were similar to those of matched probation controls. Administration of the checklist encountered many practical difficulties and was abandoned. Nevertheless, ship captains' reports, client self-evaluations, and the probation officer survey were very positive and supportive of the program. Questions to consider when conducting such evaluations include distinguishing between individual-level and system-level objectives, linking evaluation closely to declared project aims, and the need for parallel evaluations of outcomes and processes. (SV)

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Issues in Evaluation

A KEITH BOTTOMLEY

Keith is Professor of Criminology and Head of the Social Policy and Professional Studies Department of the University of Hull. He is also Director of the University's Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice. He and colleagues have recently completed an evaluation of a four-year collaborative project between the Sail Training Association and Humberside Probation Service.

I should make it clear at the outset that I shall be approaching this topic today as an academic criminologist, and not as a practitioner - or as a politician! I was invited to participate in this weekend conference because of my involvement, with colleagues at Hull University, in an evaluation of Humberside Probation Service's Sail Training Project, which has been sponsored by the Rank Foundation for the last 4 years. I shall be drawing upon some of the practical and theoretical problems experienced in our evaluation of this project to identify a number of issues and lessons that might have wider application for the evaluation of other similar outdoor pursuits projects for young offenders.

The present context and political climate, for criminologists and criminal justice practitioners, is one of competing views and questions being raised about "What works?" with offenders - whether those who are in prison or those for whom alternative community measures are being used, in an attempt to divert them from a continued career of offending. In this climate it is more than ever important to be able to show conclusively that innovative outdoor pursuits and adventure programmes provide a better, cheaper and more effective method of dealing with offenders than custodial or other non-custodial alternatives. To those who ask "Why should we be bothered with evaluation?" - the answers are not only about basic professional concerns to demonstrate the outcome of your work, however much you are personally convinced of its value, but perhaps more importantly to provide hard evidence for the public, for politicians and potential funders of the crime reduction effects of such projects.

Humberside Sail Training Project

In 1989, the Rank Foundation agreed to fund up to 40 places a year for 3 years on Sail Training Association (STA) voyages for probation clients in Humberside, aged 17-25 years. The voyages last 14 days, on the schooners Malcolm Miller and Sir Winston Churchill, and are usually across the North Sea or round the coast of Britain. The project was aimed at the more serious offenders, at risk of custodial sentences. Although the underlying "treatment theory" or rationale of the scheme was never fully articulated, it revolved around the notion of the personal benefits to be derived by young adult offenders from a challenging physical experience, providing enhanced self-esteem, self-knowledge, and self-discipline.

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In the event, for a variety of reasons (including the Prison Service's unwillingness to allow temporary release from Young Offender Institutions to enable trainees to undertake voyages which would involve visiting foreign ports) the number of referrals to the scheme was lower than anticipated, so that even after the Rank Foundation agreed to extend the scheme for a fourth year, a total of only 60 offenders went on the STA voyages between October 1989 and November 1993. [Note: Of the 140 referrals to the scheme in the four years, only 11 were rejected outright; but of the rest who were selected, over half withdrew or were withdrawn by their supervising probation officers before taking up their places on a voyage.]

There were several elements in the evaluation, which was originally intended to be based upon analyses of:

- reconviction rates for up to 2 years after completion of the voyage;
- changes in the offenders' self-perceptions, etc, by use of an adapted "problem checklist" to be administered before the voyage, and then 2 months and 12 months after its completion;
- reports from the Captain or Watch Officer;
- clients' self-evaluation of the benefits derived from the voyage.

In order for meaningful conclusions to be able to be drawn from the reconviction statistics and from the results of the problem check-lists, it was important to identify a *control group* of probation clients who matched those who went on the voyages in as many relevant factors as possible, eg age, offence, previous convictions, length of supervision order and so on. The main aim of the evaluation was thus to see whether, or to what extent, the voyage experience resulted in a reduced level of reoffending when compared to a control group of similar young adult offenders on probation in Humberside. In addition, it was intended to see whether participation in the STA scheme had any significant effect upon offenders' attitudes and self-perceptions (as measured by the problem check-list), to see how they coped with the demands of the voyage itself, as reflected in the reports of the captain, and to monitor their own views and those of their supervising probation officers about what they might have gained from the experience.

Reconvictions. The initial results of the reconviction data analysis were as follows:

- out of the 16 voyagers in Year 1, 7 (44 per cent) had further court appearances resulting in convictions in the 12 months after the voyage, although usually only one such appearance;
- out of the 16 probation clients in the Year 1 control group, 6 (38 per cent) had further court appearances, averaging two each;
- in Year 2, out of 9 voyagers for whom a control client had been identified, 4 (44 per cent) had further convictions - normally just one court appearance;
- whereas 5 (56 per cent) of the control group had further court appearances, averaging 2 each.

Thus, in the first two years of the STA project, for which relatively complete control group information was available, there was little significant or systematic difference in the proportions who reoffended, although the control group clients tended to reoffend rather more frequently in the 12 month period.

In Year 3 of the project, as a decision had been taken by the Probation Service to discontinue the use of a control group for the purpose of the administration of the check-list, no clients were identified for the purposes of reconviction data. However, police statistics showed that of the 17 clients who went on Sail Training voyagers, 7 (41 per cent) were reconvicted - which was a very similar proportion as in the first two years.

It seems clear, therefore, that approximately 4 out of 10 of those who went on the voyages were reconvicted in the 12 months after the voyage - but this was a similar rate of reoffending as that found among matched probation clients, although the latter tended to average rather more court appearances than the voyagers.

Problem check-list. The administration of the problem check-list, to monitor any changes in clients' attitudes and self-perceptions, was dogged by administrative and other difficulties almost from the start. In the first year, all those who went on STA voyages completed a check-list before the voyage, but only 56 per cent completed a check-list 2 months after the voyage, with just 2 out of the 16 voyagers completing the 12 month check-list. In the second year (when the administration of the project ran into particular problems following the departure of a key worker at Probation Service Headquarters) only half the voyagers completed the first check-list, prior to going on the voyage.

In the light of the practical difficulties encountered in achieving a satisfactory check-list completion rate, and particularly because of the difficulties and obstacles surrounding the completion of check-lists by control clients, which led to a decision to discontinue the control group check-list, it was decided that little of real value was likely to emerge from such a diluted exercise as remained, so that the check-lists were not completed in the third and fourth years of the project, thereby depriving the evaluation of potentially valuable data to put alongside the rather equivocal results of the reconviction data analysis.

However, to assess the potential value of this evaluation instrument we carried out an analysis of 4 matched pairs of voyagers and control clients from Year 1 for whom we had a pre-voyage and a 2-month post-voyage check-list. From this analysis there were some indications that the Sail Training experience helped some of the young adult offenders to become more aware of their own behaviour, particularly in relation to discipline. There was also some indication that they found it easier to mix with people after the voyage although, perhaps paradoxically, some of them were also more conscious of their identities as offenders. On a further positive note, all of the clients after the voyage *disagreed* with the statement that they were dull or uninteresting compared to half who had *agreed* with that before the voyage. None of the control group felt that they were dull or uninteresting before or after the voyage! Perhaps rather surprisingly, there was relatively little change in the clients' self-confidence after the voyage - indeed, the two who did not feel confident prior to the voyage also did not afterwards. Three of the four voyagers agreed more strongly in the post-voyage check-list that they liked responsibilities, although one client gave a more negative response.

The results of this analysis of checklists are difficult to interpret in view of the small numbers involved. However, the fact that the results do reveal certain positive changes suggests that the systematic use of this sort of checklist might be of value in future evaluations. Whilst there is some evidence from these findings that the voyages may be "character building", there are also hints that for some offenders the experience may bring to light some of their limitations (eg ability to "stick at things") in a way that might decrease their self-confidence or damage their self-image if not properly handled by supervisors.

Some of the practical problems surrounding the administration of the check-lists were symptomatic of the evaluation not really being fully "owned" by the Probation Service as a whole or integrated into the ongoing supervision of those who had been on a voyage. Few officers appreciated the relevance of the check-list aspect of the evaluation exercise - and certainly not for those identified as controls. The eventual abandonment of the control group for check-list purposes also had the unintended consequence of reducing the value of the reconviction data for the third and fourth years. As a result, we had to rely much more upon the captains' reports and the clients' own self-evaluations after the voyage. However, these instruments are both rather more subjective, and provide no yard-stick for proper comparisons.

Captains' reports. Captains' reports (from the Watch Officer or Ship's Master) were available for 90 per cent of those who went on the voyages in all four years. These reports covered: general attitude; work efficiency; initiative; reliability; social relationships with other crew members; working relationships; behaviour under pressure; need for supervision; and attitude to supervision. We scored the reports on each factor (usually using a 4-point scale) from poor (1) to excellent (4). The vast majority of voyagers scored very well - with 85 per cent averaging in the top half of the scale. 5 voyagers were invited back in the following year, to assist as crew members or Watch leaders. Only 8 young offenders scored below half, of whom 5 were sent home before the end of the voyage, for disruptive behaviour, and one for excessive drunkenness. Clearly, therefore, on the evidence of these captains' reports, the application and achievement of the offenders whilst on the voyage was generally very good indeed.

Post-voyage client self-evaluations. Despite the constant efforts and reminders from the scheme's administrators just 30 (50 per cent) of the voyagers completed the post-voyage self-evaluations - ranging from 70 per cent in the first year and 60 per cent in the fourth year to only 20 per cent in the second year.

However, apart from those who were sent home, all but one of the clients felt that they had gained something positive from the voyage. Among the most common responses to the open ended questions were that the voyage:

- enabled them to make new friends and work as a member of a team;
- increased their self-confidence;
- provided them with opportunities to travel abroad;
- gave them a chance to learn new skills.

The vast majority also commented on the *demands* that the voyage had made upon them. Most felt that it had changed them (for the good) in some way or other, eg self-confidence, ability to relate to others. There is little doubt that from the clients' point of view, the voyages had generally been a great success. This in itself is perhaps a considerable achievement - whatever the longer term effects may or may not be upon their criminal careers, personal development or working lives.

Probation Officers' survey. As a final element in the evaluation we decided to send a questionnaire to a sample of 15 probation officers, from 7 different field teams across Humberside, who had referred one or more of their clients to the STA project during its 4-year duration. There was a good response rate of 80 per cent - indicating the high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the scheme on the part of those who had used it more than many of their colleagues.

The majority of the officers surveyed felt that the scheme had been very worthwhile for their clients - although they recognised the internal administrative problems that had led to its not being used as much as it could, and in their view should, have been. When asked what they thought were the main aims and values of the Sail Training scheme they said things like:

- to broaden the horizons
- enhance self-respect and self-confidence
- to recognise the claims of other people
- to provide discipline, and push them to new limits.

Interestingly, perhaps, there was no specific mention of the aim or likelihood of reducing reoffending.

This brief sketch of some of the findings and issues arising in the course of a small-scale evaluation of a single scheme in the North of England illustrates some of the problems, pitfalls and pay-offs of trying to evaluate the impact of outdoor pursuits activities. I want to conclude by trying to broaden the consideration of evaluation of such schemes and to suggest a number of questions to bear in mind when embarking upon such evaluation.

Process and pitfalls of evaluation

No evaluation is possible unless that which is being evaluated has clear *aims and objectives*. Therefore, a crucial first step for any project is to set out its agreed aims. In the context of adventure based activities, a key dimension here is to distinguish those aims which focus on the *individual level* and those which are directed at the *system level*.

For example, *individual* level aims, in schemes that work at least in part with young *offenders* or those *at risk* of offending, would include the reduction of reoffending or prevention of initial offending, and also perhaps personal development objectives (even if there is no clear evidence of an association with crime reduction).

System level objectives in such schemes might include diversion from custody, and the provision of more positive/humane and/or cheaper alternatives to custody or traditional community treatment measures.

Evaluation must then be linked as closely as possible to an assessment and measurement of the extent to which the declared project aims have been achieved. A key element in this exercise - and one that often creates problems of implementation - is the selection of an adequate *control group* of those who are very similar in all relevant respects to those selected for the scheme but for whom conventional methods are used. A control group is essential if the evaluation is going to be able to make comparative statements, at either the individual or system level. To show the apparent "effects" of a project in isolation is difficult and to some extent literally meaningless unless there is a systematic way of knowing or at least making an informed judgment of *what might have happened* to the person (or the system) without the project's intervention.

Another important distinction to make in the context of evaluation is that between *outcome* and *process* evaluation.

For many purposes, and many audiences, the primary or exclusive interest is in the evaluation of outcomes. Reviews of such evaluations in the field of criminal justice, sentencing and the effectiveness of penal measures in the 1970s - first in the United States and then in the UK - were very pessimistic, suggesting that "Nothing works". Subsequent research and "evaluations of evaluations"(!) has served to modify the overwhelmingly negative messages coming from these first surveys, but it has to be said that the evidence for the crime-reduction outcome of outdoor pursuits and adventure based projects is very limited indeed, at this stage. Moreover, it is often very difficult to interpret the apparently negative research findings, partly because they have not included any parallel evaluation of the *processes* involved, which might go some way towards explaining the reasons for apparent failures of projects to achieve the desired results.

Another recognised element in criminological evaluation studies is what has been termed the "interaction" effect, whereby positive effects of a scheme on some offenders may be cancelled out, and thereby "masked", by comparable negative effects on others in the scheme.

A more fundamental possibility that might explain the relative failure (if such it be) of outdoor pursuits and adventure based schemes in significantly reducing offending is that they are based on underlying (and usually implicit rather than explicit) theories of offending behaviour of an individualistic kind that are no longer supported by wider criminological research. Arguably the main trends in criminological theory in the last 10 to 15 years have emphasised the important role of the immediate environment in which young people grow up and the situational contexts and opportunities within which crime is likely to thrive. In other words, there is no longer the unchallenged faith in the ability of inner change to affect the behaviour and resist the challenges posed by the environment, and its social and economic pressures. Even if adventure based experiential learning has great power to change a person's attitudes and behaviour, it has increasingly to compete against a world of almost irresistible pressures to join in deviant and delinquent activities in pursuit of individual or collective goals or satisfactions.

Finally, among the other lessons for the successful introduction and evaluation of innovative schemes for offenders that emerge from our experience in Humberside, is the need to recognise that new schemes have to be "owned" by the service or professions that have to deliver - from the senior managers down to the grass-roots practitioners and project administrators. The management of innovation requires *commitment* and *resources* of both people and money to have any real chance of succeeding. There has to be shared ownership and agreement on aims and objectives - including, hopefully, a recognition of the need to monitor and evaluate the work that is being done.

Evaluation and communication

Who or what is evaluation for?

It is to provide evidence to persuade other professional workers and politicians at local and central levels that the work you do is effective. It is to persuade potential funders that such schemes are worth investing their money in, for the future of young people and the communities of which they are a part. It is to give the workers confirmation of the value of what they are doing, not just at the level of faith and "gut feeling" but with objective evidence of achievements.

Changing people's behaviour is a complex matter - particularly young people whose early life experiences have often been damaging and traumatic. Crime and delinquency are a product both of the individual and his or her current environment, with its powerful social, economic and personal influences. An apparent failure to show the crime reduction effects of schemes should not always be accepted at face value, as there are many factors that can affect the methodology and thereby the results. The hope for the future lies in harnessing a shared faith in the value of what is being done to the difficult but vital task of evaluation to persuade others of this value.